

Perseverance Through Advanced Melanoma: Clay Hummer

When his skin cancer returned, Clay Hummer sought clinical trials for more options to treatment the melanoma.

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Clay Hummer is no stranger to perseverance, and his journey to today was not always easy. He gave up a career in law that he worked hard for to get completely sober and start a fresh chapter, moving to Texas in his 40s where he met the love of his life Christi. So, when he was diagnosed with melanoma shortly after his move, he knew quite a bit about overcoming a challenge.

An Early Stage Melanoma Diagnosis and Recurrence

Clay had just moved to Austin, TX in 2014 when he noticed a mole on the back of his neck. A trip to the dermatologist and a biopsy confirmed he had early-stage melanoma. He underwent surgery to remove the lesion, and his doctors told him they successfully removed it. “I thought because we got it early, I was in the clear,” remembered Clay. When [caught early](#), most melanomas are successfully cured with [surgery](#) alone.

But barely a year later, Clay noticed a lump in his neck. Believing he had an infected hair follicle, he saw his doctor who gave him antibiotics to treat it. However, when the lump did not go away, Clay returned to his dermatologist who referred him to a surgical oncologist for further evaluation.

The surgical oncologist took a biopsy of the lump and performed a CT scan. The biopsy gave Clay an answer: his melanoma was back. The CT scan also revealed a lesion on the other side of his neck, prompting a second surgery to remove 25 lymph nodes on the right side of his neck and 5 on the left. In total, two lymph nodes were found to be positive for melanoma, and his melanoma was classified as [Stage 3B](#).

Following surgery, Clay was offered [Interferon](#), an early [adjuvant](#) immunotherapy for patients with high-risk melanoma. While Interferon is not commonly used today due to its demanding dosing schedule and potentially severe side effects, it was the only option for patients like Clay for many years. Before making any decisions, Clay and his wife Christi decided to do some research of their

own.

Clinical Trials as a Treatment Option for Melanoma

Through their research, Clay and Christi learned that [clinical trials](#) are often a viable treatment option for patients with melanoma. “At that point it boiled down to Interferon with a chance of severe side effects and possibly low survival, or the unknown of a clinical trial,” said Clay. “I was willing to try anything.”

Clay Hummer during treatment

Courtesy of Melanoma Research Alliance

With not much time to spare, Clay and Christi found the Checkmate 238 Study – evaluating [Opdivo](#) (nivolumab) versus [Yervoy](#) (ipilimumab) in patients with resected Stage 3B–C or Stage 4

melanoma. After some paperwork and eligibility tests, Clay was enrolled. Each week for an entire year, Clay was seen by Texas Oncology at the Baylor Scott & White Charles A. Sammons Cancer Center in Dallas for infusions, scans, and various tests associated with the trial.

While the three-hour drive each way was an undertaking for the couple, Christi's job allowed her to adjust her schedule so that she could balance her roles as an employee and caregiver. "I can't even begin to understand what my wife has gone through as a caregiver," remarked Clay. "From accompanying me to all my appointments, advocating for my well-being and care, and dealing with billing and insurance, she has been my champion through it all."

Thankfully, Clay tolerated the treatment well, and when the year-long treatment portion of the trial officially ended, his scans showed No Evidence of Disease (NED). He was under observation for an additional four years, and successfully completed the study in 2020.

A Second Recurrence Advances to Stage 4

A year later in 2021, when a dangerous winter storm hit Texas, leaving millions without power and scrambling for resources, Clay ended up in the emergency room. While being evaluated, doctors found a nodule in his left lung. A biopsy at MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston confirmed that Clay's melanoma was back, and this time it was [Stage 4](#).

"It was always in the back of my mind that my melanoma could return. Since my first recurrence, I've always felt like I was living on borrowed time," said Clay.

Shortly after learning of his recurrence, Clay began a four-month treatment plan that combined [Opdivo with Yervoy](#) — with infusions every three weeks — followed by single-agent Opdivo for an additional twenty months. At first, Clay was depressed and struggling with the reality that he was once again facing melanoma. But with some time, and the unexpected news that he could have his law license re-instated contingent upon passing the Bar Exam again, things started to look up.

Clay took the initiative and started studying for the Bar while he was being treated, going to the gym, taking part in the [Livestrong](#) program for people with cancer at his local YMCA, and reading books centered around melanoma and the patient experience. He also began reflecting on his life's journey up until that point, especially his struggles with addiction. "Going through the 12-step program decades ago ended up helping me with my cancer journey more than anything else, especially when it came to recognizing — and accepting — what I could and couldn't control," said Clay.

Upon completion of his two-year-long treatment in March of this year, Clay's scans once again showed NED.

No Evidence of Disease and Living Life to the Fullest

Today, Clay sees his oncologist every three months for scans, his local dermatologist in Austin

every four months, and his dermatologist at MD Anderson once a year. “I’ve got an A-team of doctors,” remarked Clay. Since being declared NED in March, all scans and skin checks have been clear.

While he is currently taking a break from studying for the Bar, Clay is investing more time in “living life to the fullest” — something he admits he never fully understood the meaning of up until now. Clay and Christi just recently returned from a trip to Colorado where they went hiking in Rocky Mountain National Park, an experience and memory they will both treasure forever.

He also connected with the melanoma community for the first time, joining a Melanoma Story Swap hosted by MRA in May of this year. “It was very refreshing, and reminded me of AA in some ways,” he said. “It’s always helpful to hear other peoples’ stories.”

Clay hopes that sharing his story will have the same impact: “I’m not doing anything extraordinary — I’m just living my life. But I’ve found beauty and inspiration in the day-to-day and hope others going through a melanoma diagnosis can too. You’ve just got to keep living.”

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